**Things are not getting better in North Korea**

In our January Cathay Post newsletter, it was described that N. Korea was having serious problems with their nuclear weapons development after a nuclear test disaster in 2017. Many key nuclear scientists may have been killed in that test disaster and it is believed that it will take a lot more time before they can replace their lost personnel and rebuild their nuclear program. It was suggested that the N. Koreans are bluffing when they boast about their ability to attack with nuclear weapons.

It now appears that not only is the N. Korean nuclear development program set back years, during the first week in January 2021 N. Korean leader Kim Il Jung admitted in their national convocation that their economic planning and programs had failed. Their 5 year economic planning had missed their goals, and missed their goals enormously. Kim described the situation as the “worse of the worst” for his country. Food shortages have added great pressure on the government.

International sanctions, natural disasters (floods), and preparations for the corona virus have taken a very heavy toll on N. Korea. Her healthcare capabilities are very limited, and action taken to minimize the pandemic threat has put additional pressure on the entire country.

The N. Koreans appear to be having so many serious problems that they should not be a threat to anyone for the predictable future.

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***Sources:***

[***https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/north-korea-admits-failure-mulls-future***](https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/north-korea-admits-failure-mulls-future)

**North Korea Admits Failure, Mulls Future**

**By William Gallo*, VOA*, January 06, 2021 02:57 AM**

North Korea has opened a major, multi-day political gathering in the capital, Pyongyang, with leader Kim Jong Un using the forum to **acknowledge recent economic failures**.

Addressing thousands of tightly packed delegates at an auditorium in Pyongyang, **Kim admitted his country had not reached the goals set out in an economic plan for the five-year period that just expired.**

**“The goals we set were immensely underachieved in almost all areas,” Kim said** in an opening speech at the eighth congress of the ruling Workers’ Party, according to state media.

**The last five years, Kim said, were "unprecedented" and “the worst of the worst” for North Korea**. In response, he said the country should “strengthen our own power and our own self-reliant capacity."

Pictures posted by the official Korean Central News Agency showed thousands of participants seated close together in a large hall, with no observable social distancing measures. No one appeared to be wearing masks.

It is **only the second time Kim has convened a party congress since he took power in December 2011**. This year’s gathering, which is expected to set North Korea’s policy goals for the next five years, comes at one of the most challenging times of Kim’s rule.

**Economic problems**

**North Korea’s economy had already been held back by international sanctions over its nuclear program, but a series of devastating recent floods as well as strict coronavirus measures dramatically worsened the situation**.

Overall, North Korea’s economy may have contracted by at least 8.5% in 2020, according to an estimate by Fitch Solutions.

One big reason: North Korea closed its border with China, its biggest trading partner and economic lifeline, last January, shortly after news of the coronavirus emerged. That helped lead to an 80% drop in trade between the two countries, according to the Korea International Trade Association.

**Supply shortages**

**NK News, a Seoul-based website focusing on North Korea, on Tuesday reported “significant and ongoing food shortages” in Pyongyang, especially at grocery stores frequented by the country’s elite.**

Key items such as sugar, cooking oil, and toothpaste “are almost completely gone” from some supermarket shelves in Pyongyang, NK News reported. Local fresh fruit and vegetables were being sold at over five times the usual cost, it added.

Despite strict coronavirus restrictions, North Korea insists not a single person in its country has tested positive for the coronavirus — a claim widely disputed by global health experts and others.

**North Korea is especially vulnerable to a disease outbreak. It is one of the world’s poorest countries and its medical infrastructure is badly outdated and under-resourced.**

According to a Wall Street Journal report, North Korea has submitted an application to receive Covid-19 virus vaccines from Gavi, an international alliance of governments, drug companies, charities and civic organizations that arrange global vaccination campaigns in lower income countries.

**North Korean leaders have called the pandemic response a top priority and a matter of “national survival**.” Given that dynamic, it is not clear what North Korea can do to stimulate its economy, at least until the virus threat recedes and border restrictions are loosened, many analysts say.

“It’s not like Kim Jong Un is going to come out and promise denuclearization, marketization, and human rights improvements,” says Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul.

“What optimists are looking for is a willingness to engage in diplomacy with the incoming Biden administration, mention of economic development opportunities including with South Korea, and any openness to humanitarian cooperation during the pandemic," Easley said.

"Pessimists expect the Kim regime will emphasize military strength, self-reliant socialism, and an ongoing crackdown on subversive elements,” he added.

**Admitting failure?**

It would not be the first time for Kim to admit policy failures, especially on the economy.

In August, the Central Committee of the Workers' Party acknowledged plans to improve the economy have been "seriously delayed" by "severe internal and external situations."

The Workers' Party last convened for a full congress in 2016, which was its first in 36 years

In recent years, Kim has attempted to convey a more modest "man of the people" persona than that of his father, former North Korean leader Kim Jong Il.

Lim Eul-chul with Seoul's Institute of Far Eastern Studies of Kyungnam University questions whether Kim actually admitted failure on Tuesday. But he says Kim's comments were still unusual in a North Korean context, where top leaders are expected to be highly revered.

"It is not quite right to say that he admitted failure," Lim said. "He acknowledged that the results were not sufficient following the seventh congress, which is still not very common considering North Korea's usual behavior.

**Foreign policy direction**

The party congress, which comes two weeks ahead of the inauguration of U.S. President-elect Joe Biden, is also being watched for signs about North Korea’s foreign policy.

North Korea has for months boycotted nuclear talks, frustrated at the U.S. refusal to relax sanctions. U.S. President Donald Trump met Kim three times during his presidency, but the meetings did not lead to North Korea giving up its nuclear weapons program.

Biden has said he won’t rule out meeting Kim face-to-face, but has suggested that would only come as part of broader, working-level negotiations.

On Tuesday, the top U.S. general in South Korea said Pyongyang does not appear to be preparing a major provocation around the onset of the Biden administration.

“We're not seeing any indicators that suggest that there would be a major provocation — but that's today. That could change next week,” General Robert Abrams, the commander of U.S. Forces Korea, told an online forum.

People watch a TV screen airing reports about North Korea's firing missiles with file images of missiles at the Seoul Railway…

No Signs of N. Korean Tests Ahead of Biden Inauguration, US General Says

Pyongyang often conducts major tests near US presidential transitions

**Next steps**

North Korea has often timed major tests, including of ballistic missiles or nuclear weapons, around U.S. presidential transitions to demonstrate its military capabilities and possibly gain leverage in future negotiations with Washington.

Kimsaid a year ago he no longer feels bound by his self-imposed pause on nuclear and long-range missile tests, raising fears of a return to major tensions on the Korean peninsula.

In October, North Korea used a military parade to unveil a massive new intercontinental ballistic missile, which appears designed to overwhelm U.S. missile defenses. Some suspect Pyongyang may test the missile or other weapons systems in the coming months.

Many in South Korea are also watching to see if the party congress will provide any hints about future inter-Korean cooperation.

North Korea last year unilaterally raised tensions with the South, a bitter disappointment for many in Seoul. South Korean President Moon Jae-in, whose five-year presidential term ends in May 2022, has placed a high priority on improving inter-Korean ties.

During his opening speech Tuesday, Kim did not mention the United States, South Korea, or nuclear issues. The event is expected to last for multiple days.

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[***https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\_pacific/north-korea-kim-jong-un-coronavirus/2021/01/06/9a1cca5e-4fd4-11eb-a1f5-fdaf28cfca90\_story.html***](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/north-korea-kim-jong-un-coronavirus/2021/01/06/9a1cca5e-4fd4-11eb-a1f5-fdaf28cfca90_story.html)***?***

**North Korea’s Kim Jong Un acknowledges ‘painful lessons’ as economy suffers**

[**Simon Denyer**](https://www.washingtonpost.com/people/simon-denyer/) **and**[**Min Joo Kim**](https://www.washingtonpost.com/people/min-joo-kim/)**, *Washington Post*, Jan 6, 2021**

**TOKYO** — **North Korean leader Kim Jong Un opened a rare ruling party Congress this week with a frank admission that his country's economy had "immensely underachieved" in the past five years and said he had learned "painful lessons" from the experience, state media reported Wednesday**.

Since taking power in 2011, Kim has made a habit of admitting failures even as he celebrates the successes of his regime. In October, he [made a tearful apology](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/12/kim-jong-un-sheds-tears-as-he-delivers-rare-apology-to-north-korea-over-failings) to the North Korean people for failing to always live up to their expectations, under the twin pressures of sanctions and the [coronavirus](https://www.washingtonpost.com/coronavirus/?itid=lk_inline_manual_4) pandemic and **after one of the toughest years for the economy in decades.**

Kim did not flag any fundamental change in direction, however, nor suggest in the Tuesday remarks that he would approach the West, cap in hand, for sanctions relief. The “quickest and surest solution” to the problems North Korea is facing is the “reinforcement of our very own self-reliant power by all possible means,” he said.

He also celebrated the regime’s “miraculous victories” over the past five years and the “remarkable” achievement of being **able to hold the Eighth Congress of the ruling Workers’ Party of Korea during a pandemic, as he addressed about 7,000 delegates who were not wearing masks.**

[North Korea parades huge new ICBM, but Kim stresses deterrent nature](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/northkorea-military-parade-missile-icbm/2020/10/10/f6f13a74-0869-11eb-8719-0df159d14794_story.html?itid=lk_interstitial_manual_9)

But he stressed the “heavy responsibility of leading Korea to a stronger and richer path in this world full of harsh challenges and instability,” and finding a “shortcut to bring happiness to the people of our nation.”

It was only the second party Congress to take place in the past four decades, with previous gatherings in 2016 and 1980, as Kim appears to move toward a Chinese model of meeting every five years to review and chart economic plans.

Kim made no mention of the United States in what was a domestically focused speech, although he said that “reactionary forces” who are hostile toward North Korea “suffered severe damage.”

**But unlike in 2016, he also made no mention of nuclear weapons,** and his language left the door open to possible engagement with President-elect Joe Biden, experts said.

“He’s leaving room to deal with the Biden administration,” said John Delury, a professor at Yonsei University in Seoul. “It’s very hard not to see that as deliberate.”

[South Korea to criminalize sending leaflets to North Korea, bowing to regime](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/north-korea-leaflets-defectors-kim/2020/12/10/9c6d7328-3a92-11eb-aad9-8959227280c4_story.html?itid=lk_interstitial_manual_18)

Some experts have expressed concern that Kim might greet the incoming Biden administration with a missile test, as a way of getting Washington’s attention and raising itself up in the diplomatic agenda. So far, at least, there is no sign of that, and Delury said the two sides are “looking to size one another up.”

Lim Eul-chul, an expert on the North Korean economy at South Korea’s Kyungnam University, said he saw hints of possible economic overhauls in the next five-year plan that should be announced this week as the Congress continues.

“Kim himself is painfully aware of the problems inside the North Korean society,” he said.

In his speech, Kim said officials had been dispatched to different parts of the country “to sincerely listen to voices of party members, farmers and workers on the ground.”

Lim said that signals Kim’s willingness to “understand public sentiment at the grass-roots level and develop a more realistic and effective solution.”

**After closing its borders soon after the coronavirus pandemic emerged in neighboring China, North Korea says it has not recorded any cases of the virus, although experts and South Korea’s government say this is hard to believe.**

While reliable figures for economic growth are hard to come by, North Korea’s trade with China fell to roughly a quarter of its prior levels in 2020, according to Chinese customs data.

Shortages of imports also pushed sugar prices sharply higher, South Korea’s intelligence agency said, while floods in the summer contributed to a 10 percent decline in the rice harvest, according to Seoul’s Rural Development Administration.